

Screwing Aliens and Screwing *with* Aliens: *Torchwood* slashes The Doctor.

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Biography.

I am currently Reader in Media & Education at the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice, Bournemouth University, UK. I am programme leader for the Masters in Creative & Media Education and I coordinate pedagogic research in the Media School at Bournemouth.

My other research interests include the adaptation of literature, comic books and videogames to film and television as well as blogging, fanfic, and other forms of personal expression online. In addition I am an experienced broadcaster and journalist for BBC Online and BBC Radio, a regular contributor to the independent film magazine, *The Big Picture*, and co-editor of *The Media Research Journal*.

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In summer 2004 an independent study of the BBC's web provision was published. The Graf Report stated for the first time that the BBC's web content should be now viewed as the corporation's third medium – alongside radio and television. In addition the report put the case for what it called '360 degree commissioning' whereby content was produced across the BBC's platforms, simultaneously. The effect was almost immediate, with the BBC shutting down some of its many websites and reorganizing its new media division as elements of existing departments, rather than an adjunct to radio and television output. At the same time discussions were already underway for the revival of a

television franchise which had been largely ignored for 16 years, despite having an almost fanatical following.

At first glance the re-launched *Doctor Who*, in 2005, seemed to embody the BBC's new cross-platform policy. The new series came with a raft of merchandise, novelizations, comic books and its sister 'commentary' series *Doctor Who Confidential*. The accompanying website hosted games and other downloads and this was followed by the more 'adult' spin-off, *Torchwood* in the fall of 2006 and then *The Sarah Jane Adventures* from the beginning of 2007. The *Doctor Who* series has always been surrounded by an array of texts, some official, most not, since its inception in 1963, so this was nothing new. What was new however, was the dialogic relationship between the new *Doctor Who*, and the other 'utterances' such as *Torchwood*. There had been a series of official *Doctor Who* novels complementing the series, right through the franchise's 16 year hiatus. Up until 1991, these publications were novelizations, that is reworked stories and scripts from the original TV show. From 1991 however the novels were largely new stories produced by a new generation of writers. Many of these writers had grown-up with the original *Doctor Who* series and were self-confessed fans. Mark Gatiss wrote the original *Who* novels *Roundheads* in 1997 and *Last of the Gaderene* in 2000. These new stories featured the second and third Doctors respectively. Gatiss would graduate to write for the revised *Who* television series from 2005, but these spin-off novels were vaguely canonical and were not dialogically linked to *Who* diegesis. *Torchwood* would be very different. In this chapter, I aim to show how the revived *Doctor Who* series, and *Torchwood*, has its origins in the fan communities and activities that had taken place during the show's hiatus between 1989 and 2005. Fans of the franchise, an aggressively passionate and committed constituency, had kept the series in cultural circulation by writing their own fan fiction. These fan produced writings would have a significant influence on *Doctor Who*, and a more transgressive form, slash fiction (or slash) strategies would be ignited and enacted by *Torchwood*.

The Dialogics of *Torchwood*.

Fan fiction (or fanfic) is a form whereby fans of a novel, film or television programme, write their own stories, publish them in fanzines ('zines) and online. Fanfic writers can develop minor characters in a well-known text or provide sequels/prequels to major literary, filmic or televisual works – which can clearly be seen in *Torchwood* with the furthering development of the Captain Jack Harkness' character. Both Russell T. Davies and Mark Gariss were *Doctor Who* fanfic writers, before Gatiss' 'profic' (officially sanctioned stories). However, as with the *Who* novels from 1991, it is rare for fanfic, or profic, to become part of any 'canon' so traditionally such texts sit outside and beyond the reach of 'official' sources.

When television became a mass medium from the mid-1950s, fanfic soon followed, and a new generation of fanfic writers began to provide episodes of their favourite TV shows,

such as *Star Trek*, *The Man from Uncle* and *Starsky & Hutch*. So, fan writing is synonymous with fan culture and fanfic acts as a type of cultural virus in the way it can mutate and evolve to suit new media. Fanfic can refashion television into what Roland Barthes would call a “writerly” text[i] as it allows for more participation, and therefore engagement, by audiences. However, most *Who* fanfic adhered to broadly canonical structure - unlike the ‘official’ spin-off novels - and rules were quickly established whereby writers had to adhere to canonical aspects of a series, character or setting, mediated by *Who*’s increasingly passionate fan-base. Fanfic that synchronically departed from the rules of the diachronic source text were generally considered to be poor. The trick was to maintain a significant level of fidelity while at the same time exploring new plots and developments. In this way minor characters in a canon would become popular with fanfic writers because they offered more scope for exploration, but still within the recognisable diegesis of a TV series.

The 1960s saw a boom in fanfic, generally in the science fiction genre, and the fledgling *Doctor Who* series was no different. The *Who* diegesis provides a great deal of scope for the fanfic writer as the countless regenerations, companions and time travel possibilities allow the type of artistic freedom and expression that adhering to a *Star Trek* narrative, for example, would not provide. This decade also saw the emergence of a splinter-genre of fanfic which would deliberately frame itself as non-canonical. In fact this was its virtue. Slash fiction – so called because of its denotative ‘slash’ in advertising a transgressive non-canonical coupling – was a more aggressive form of sexually explicit fan writing. Slash fic writers would imagine sexual relationships between characters in largely mainstream television programmes which weren’t portrayed or explored in the original text.

Apart from the miss-fire of the 1996 television movie – which perhaps went too far in exploring the Doctor’s sexuality - and a few radio productions, *Who* fans had been starved of content for almost two decades. Despite this, the BBC continued to generate a great deal of income from merchandising. *The Doctor Who Magazine* – its earliest incarnation beginning in 1979 – provided fans with information and interviews with former cast members, writers and crew. The magazine also featured largely non-canonical stories, but I would argue that the general strategy was for nostalgia, which was the permanent state of the *Who* fan and spin-off industry. The magazine continued – as a monthly publication – throughout the series’ enforced television hiatus. A regular comic strip would feature previous Doctors, but would align itself with the current incumbent from 2005, in a broad attempt at fidelity. Back stories for characters such as the Cybermen were explored by a series of writers. So, it was clear that the fans not only demanded more from the *Who* diegesis, but they were willing to go the extra step and write their own stories for an increasingly global audience online. Fanfic writing allows for fans to be in constant conversation with a text. Readers are often writers too, and the climax of the narrative is delayed as it is a never ending unclosed process which blurs the boundaries between writers and readers. Slash writers further subvert this process by reimagining the relationships in the progeny series, particularly between the tenth Doctor and Rose Tyler.

The popularity of the web would extend slash fic's reach and would create a vibrant fan community, whereby consumers of texts elsewhere could debate their merits with like-minded audiences. There is an instantaneity about fan writing, and often readers are very vocal for writers to continue a particular narrative. As Susan Clerc suggests: "the most primal instinct a fan has is to talk to other fans about their common interest"[ii] (2001: 216) and *Who* fans had had 18 years to discuss their favourite text within their own creative productivity. Since the 1960s, fan culture had become increasingly participatory as John Fiske observes:

"Fans produce and circulate among themselves texts which are often crafted with production values as high as any in the official culture"[iii] (1992: 39).

However, these spheres of cultural reproduction are increasingly dialogical. *Who* has always been intertextual: the new series made overt references to not only its own back-story and history but also to other texts such as Douglas Adams *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series and even the Disney film *The Lion King*. With the addition of *Torchwood* to the franchise, these intertextualities deepened to a new level of dialogism as the new spin-off series obliquely referenced its 'parent' series: Episode 3 not only established the eponymous 'Ghost Machine' (further developed in *The Sarah Jane Adventures*) but graffiti hinted at 'The Rise of the Cybermen' *Who* episode; UNIT gets a mention in Episode 7 'Greeks bearing gifts'; there is more 'Bad Wolf' graffiti in Episode 12, 'Captain Jack Harkness'; former companion of the eighth Doctor, Samantha Jones, gets a name check in Episode 19, 'Reset' as well as the revelation that Harkness is The Face of Boe, and so on. *Torchwood* was first conceived by Russell T. Davies in 2002, as a UK version of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It was reconfigured as a *Doctor Who* spin-off in 2005, and seeded into the *Who* episode 'Tooth and Claw'. The Doctor's 'hand in a jar' became a key narrative device, and the character Gwen Cooper was worked in as a descendent of the Gwyneth seen in 'The Unquiet Dead'. *Torchwood* then becomes an utterance of the *Who* universe, engaged in a dialogical relay with the older series. For Michael Holquist, dialogism, "is a way of looking at things that always insists on the presence of the other, on the inescapable necessity of outsidedness and unfinalizability"[iv]. So, in this sense, *Torchwood* is much more than intertextual.

Dan McKee argues that the web has allowed fan communities to form more quickly and these fans therefore display "agency in their everyday media consumption"[v]. Again, for Henry Jenkins:

"...an alternative conception of fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and re-read them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture."[vi]

Similarly Clerc, writing about television fans, suggests that:

"Fans, whether online or off, discuss characterisation [and] speculate about what would have happened if some feature of a story had been different...Fans try and fill in the gaps left by writers and form connections between episodes."[vii]

In mainstream television, the biggest 'gaps' in texts are often about sexuality – any sexuality. So, slash fic writers had a rich ground to explore and develop in any number of non-canonical reconfigurings, because: "Fanfic happens in the gaps between canon. The unexplored or insufficiently explored territory."[viii] The difference here though is that *Torchwood's* explicit sexual storylines were canonical.

Fan and slash fiction then can be read here as a commentary on the 'official' culture, and this commentary - just as with the texts it seeks to comment on - has changed a great deal. Adaptation theorists such as Geoffrey Wagner[ix] have often cited a text's re-purposing as having the potential for commentary, but this dialogue is little more than a conversation between an adaptor and an adapted work. Fanfic, and its sub-genres, is a far more interactive, visible and therefore plural process, and *Torchwood's* relationship to *Doctor Who* embodies this.

So, I am suggesting that fanfic is a genre, and like any such genre, it is by no means a fixed or closed system. Rather it undergoes fundamental change and development in its life-cycle; in this case a hegemonic cycle whereby the subversive elements of slash are reworked, albeit in a neutered way, back into mainstream culture. What Pugh[x] calls the 'democratic genre' seeks to fill in what Fiske[xi], Jenkins[xii] and Clerc[xiii] all call 'gaps' left by television programmes. Now slash communities have formed online and new fanfic canons have emerged. These communities have provided nurturing spaces where a contributor's work is commented on, and feedback is given. In short, slash can be conceived of as a subversive form of appropriation, where the source text is opened-up to subversion for the purposes of a sexual and often political agenda. *Torchwood* enacted slash strategies from the start, subverting its parent series, by being far more explicitly violent and sexual.

So, fanfic now, thanks to *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood*, has a veneer of authenticity, mirroring the forms it seeks to comment on. Slash is no longer just a commentary on a text but it is a commentary on the medium of television itself. Fanfic is largely concerned with television, and is an extension of what John Ellis[xiv] calls the medium's "working through": fanfic authors take an idea, theme, or issue of concern and works through it in communion with a favourite television character or text. Slash merely takes this into a more playful realm of sexual desire.

Slashing The Doctor.

The advent of the world wide web in the early 1990s, shaped fanfic in a number of ways: it provided a new space far beyond the reach of fanzines and conventions; it facilitated more sophisticated routes of anonymity; it made fanfic more visible; it allowed fanfic writers for form online communities and slash would join with other forms of sexually explicit content online. This period was a far more dialogical era for fanfic and their writers. Slash writers could now be far more in more open conversation with the texts they were commenting on and with each other. Some sites, such as slashfanfiction.com, began to archive material from the 60s and 70s, introducing the genre to a new audience who would go on to write their own stories.

Interestingly, slash has provided problems for literary and cultural studies scholars, particularly when attempting to define the term. As Mark McLelland notes:

"Slash...is an underground fandom and many English-speaking people, including academics working in cultural studies, seem unaware of the extent of the genre or its longevity."[xv]

Hutcheon[xvi] argues that fanfic is certainly not a type of adaptation and I would agree.

Rather fanfic and slash writing is more of a conversation, where fans are in communion with an array of texts, which they already find a great deal of pleasure in.

From 1991 the first original *Doctor Who* novels emerged, which did not explicitly adhere to any canon. The popularity of the web a few years later would further encourage *Who* fanfic, and at the time of writing, www.whofic.com has 21,648 stories written by 2777 authors. Over 3000 of the stories in this archive are *Torchwood* fics. In the late 1990s, Russell T. Davies' television series *Queer As Folk* (1999 – 2000) broke new ground in its portrayal of gay relationships and characters, and pushed the boundaries of what could be shown on television. Davies' revival of *Doctor Who* was notable for its treatment of sexuality. The Doctor has always been asexual and non-violent, and Davies' new Doctor largely adhered to this model as *Doctor Who* is a 'sacred' text. However Davies and his writing team did populate the series with sexual tension and a subtly more explicit treatment of sexuality. Rose Tyler, and later Martha Jones, clearly had romantic feelings for the Time Lord, but so did Captain Jack Harkness, a bi-sexual Time Agent. Played by musical theatre star, John Barrowman, the character brought a cheeky campness to a mainstream television audience.

From the start *Torchwood* was billed as an 'adult' spin-off and Harkness was the show's central character. Indeed, the first *Star Trek* slash story, 'A Fragment out of Time' by Diane Marchant - published in the fanzine *Grup* in 1974 - imagined a sexual relationship between the two principle male characters Kirk and Spock. As McLelland notes:

"Like Western slash fiction writers, the authors took heterosexual, heteronormative narratives and 'queered' them by imagining sexual relationships between the male characters".[xvii]

So, *Torchwood* serves to develop a character in a similar fashion to the ways in which fanfic does in enacting almost slash-like strategies, and like slash, in a far more sexually explicit way. *Torchwood* is the 'profound' text to *Doctor Who*'s 'sacred' one, and the relationship between the two is what Mikhail Bakhtin would call 'carnavalesque'. Fanfic writing is itself carnivalesque as Bakhtin further argues that, "carnival...does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators".[xviii] For Simon Dentith, this carnival is:

"...an aesthetic which celebrates the anarchic body-based and grotesque elements of popular culture, and seeks to mobilise them against the humourless seriousness of official culture".[xix]

In a sense, from the late 1990s, fanfic had "remediated"[xx] television drama and this new dialogue legitimised slash to an extent. *Torchwood* then, continues the conversation with *Doctor Who*, which had been established by fan writers originally. The first episode, 'Everything Changes' – the only one of the first two seasons written by Davies - is almost painful in establishing its adult credentials with a police officer disclaiming, "It's a fucking disgrace" in the first few minutes, but it is the series' treatment of sexuality and relationships which reveal *Torchwood*'s slash-like dialogism.

In Episode 2, 'Day One' a promiscuous alien adopts a female host body and prowls Cardiff searching for men to have sex with. This episode is problematic in that we are

witness to the unwitting self-abuse of a woman, much like an extraterrestrial rohypnol attack. In one scene we see the woman take a shower, similar to the way rape victims are depicted in film and television. In the same episode, Gwen is overcome and is seduced by the alien too. From then on, sexual relationships are developed between the residents of Torchwood 3. In Episode 4, 'Cyberwoman' we meet Lisa, Ianto's girlfriend who is a Cyberwoman from Torchwood 2. In Episode 6, 'Countrycide' Gwen sleeps with Owen, and Toshiko and Mark sleep together in Episode 7, 'Greeks bearing gifts'. Jack and Ianto's relationship begins in Episode 8, 'They keep killing Suzie' and Gwen discovers them both having sex in Episode 24, 'Adrift'. Owen and a character from 1953, Mary, get romantically involved in Episode 10, 'Out of time', and Toshiko falls tragically for Tommy Brockless in Episode 16, 'To the last man'. Season two is notable for its significant ramping up of *Torchwood's* exploration of heterosexuality, homosexuality and bi-sexuality, as the show steps out of the long shadow of the TARDIS, and defines itself more as a science fiction series for grown-ups which deals with some very real (and therefore human) issues.

There are also unconsummated attractions too, not just the ongoing frisson between Toshiko and Owen, but between Jack Harkness and Captain John Hart and between Harkness and the *real* Captain Jack. I would argue here that this is precisely what slash fiction does: it fills the gaps in pre-existing material, usually with more sexually explicit material, thereby reconfiguring a text into a more transgressive form of commentary. It's clear that, as fans and fan writers themselves, the creators of the revived *Doctor Who* deliberately enacted slash strategies in creating a narrative which was so much more than an intertextually bound spin-off. The spin-off novels, comic books, animations and radio series, are vaguely canonical by virtue of their intertextuality, but *Torchwood*, by enacting these slash fic strategies, is firmly canonical.

Continuing the conversation...

Unlike the 'official' *Who* spin-off novels, *Torchwood*, like a great deal of fanfic, is at pains to establish itself as an integral part of the *Who* canon and universe. If both series were to be arranged along a timeline, then Captain Jack Harkness' regular sabbaticals from The Hub always chime with his appearances in the TARDIS. This dialogic pollination continues with the tenth Doctor's companion, Martha Jones, joining *Torchwood* for three episodes in the second season and all the members of *Torchwood* appearing in the *Doctor Who* season finale, 'The Stolen Earth/Journey's End'.

When *Doctor Who* began in 1963, it was created as an educational series for children and written by veterans of British science-fiction novels and television. In many ways, the original series reflected their concerns. Writers such as Terry Nation, Terrance Dicks and Douglas Adams were contemporaries of British science fiction writers such as Arthur C. Clarke, Brian Aldiss and J. G. Ballard. Russell T. Davies, Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss however, were *Doctor Who* fans. Not only that, but they had written *Who* fanfic, and in Gatiss' case, profic. So, it's not surprising then to note that the resurrected *Doctor Who* is very much a fan text, and it clearly and overtly enacts carnivalesque fanfic strategies. However, for Bakhtin, the carnival was always a temporary state and both

Doctor Who and *Torchwood* give the 'sacred' and the 'profane' a permanence across all forms of popular culture, and the fan writers themselves contribute to and reshape this ongoing carnival.

The new *Doctor Who* fills in the gaps left by previous versions and stories. It is able to playfully revisit and rewrite aspects of the *Who* canon, and to establish itself as a source text for the development of *Torchwood*. One way a new version of a much cherished - and 'sacred' - narrative can establish itself is to serve as an influential source for more dialogically linked texts. So, the revived *Doctor Who* is a fan commentary on the original series, characters and storylines. This in turn is commented on by a new generation of fans, some of whom now write their own stories.

All genres are subverted eventually, and fanfic is no different. *Torchwood* is *Doctor Who*'s slash fic, however its parent series rewires it as a canonical text and *Torchwood*'s exploration of transgressive sexuality is now very much part of the *Doctor Who* diegesis. Sexuality is implicit in *Who*, but explicit in *Torchwood*. This link with fan writing and fan culture allows the series to constantly adapt and reshape its structure. This is most obvious with the single-story arc of the third season of *Torchwood*, exhibited over five consecutive nights in 2009. This structure is interesting as it could be argued that this season is a commentary on the first two seasons: the third season is season one and two's fanfic.

The increasing amount of *Torchwood* (as well as *Doctor Who*) fanfic gives a good indication of the series' enduring popularity. If *Torchwood* doesn't continue beyond its third season, the fan writers and slash writers will use their *Torchwood* stories to keep open an un-ending conversation with their favourite text and a continuing commentary on the *Doctor Who* universe. A mainstream television programme that appropriates the conventions of fan writing is a bold and imaginative idea. Taking this to the next step and producing a slash version of a staple of the BBC's family entertainment output is a feat of exceedingly brave commissioning by a team of creative people who in many ways are not only paying their respects as fans, but who also recognize the dialogical relationship some fans have with a television series. In *Torchwood*'s case, it is a strategy that has paid off, because far more than being just another intertextual spin-off, *Torchwood* deepens our involvement in *Doctor Who*, and *Torchwood* deepens our understanding of *Doctor Who* and its audiences.

Words: 4048.

[i] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 4.

[ii] Susan Clerc, "Estrogen Brigades and 'Big Tits' threads: Media Fandom on-line and off," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, eds. Bell and Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2001), 216.

[iii] John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience*, ed. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 39.

[iv] Michael Holquist, *Dialogism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 195.

[v] Alan McKee, "Fandom," in *Television Studies*, ed. Miller (London: BFI, 2003), 67.

[vi] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1992), 23.

[vii] Clerc, *The Cybercultures Reader*, 216-7.

[viii] Sheenagh Pugh, *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 2005), 92.

[ix] Geoffrey Wagner, *The Novel and the Cinema* (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1975), 222-223.

[x] Pugh, *The Democratic Genre*.

[xi] Fiske, *The Adoring Audience*.

[xii] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

[xiii] Clerc, *The Cybercultures Reader*.

[xiv] John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (London: I. B Tauris), 91.

[xv] Mark McLelland, "Local meanings in global space: a case study of women's 'Boy love' web sites in Japanese and English," in *Mots Pluriels* (No. 19. October, 2001), 9.

[xvi] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 9.

[xvii] McLelland, *Mots Plurals*, 6.

[xviii] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Folk Humour and Carnival Laughter" in *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, ed. Morris (London: Arnold, 1993), 198.

[xix] Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 66.

[xx] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000).